INDIAN SOCIETY IN POST-AŚOKAN AGE

By

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The position of Aśoka in ancient Indian history has been described as "the leading character of all times" or as the greatest figure in the history. The scholars have expressed their views merely on the study of Aśokan edicts or some Buddhist scriptures, but they have failed to examine its consequences on the socio-political organisation of the country. After surveying the available material one has to differ from the view points of Dr. R. K. Mookerji or Dr. D. R. Bhandarkar and the result of the study brings one to the fresh conclusion that Aśoka was not a popular king of ancient India. It is true that Aśoka was one of the few monarchs who have controlled the faith of large portion of mankind but the sovereign was not well received by the posterity and *no tribute* was paid by the people in the later days. We ought to have estimated the worth and Value of the king after careful examination of the entire historical data on the subject. The bone of contention lies not in Valueing the sovereignty of Aśoka but the disregard of his ideology in later time and his unpopularity among the masses.

Aśoka has no part to play in building up an extensive empire (except the conquest of Kalinga). Rather, he inherited the vast dominion from his grand-father. All powers were centralized and Aśoka could neither establish peace in the country nor follow the policy of Cāṇakya. From the study of the Dhauli S. R. E. I, it appears that there was no standing policy of the king to be followed by the officers but he has to send instructions after the conquest of Kalinga in the following words :—

तुझे हि बहूसु पानसहसेसु आयता । पन (अं)

गच्छेय सुमुनिसानं । सवे मुनिसे पजा ममा ।

It is clear that his benevolent actions and religious life began by the purification of his own self after he has assumed the power of the Saṁgha i. e. after he became the head of the state as well as of the Saṁgha. Rupanath M. R. E. is very clear on this point and 'सुमि हकं सघ उपेते' leaves no doubt regarding the working of his mind. It is difficult to say whether this event gives his reaction for controlling the religious organisation or it was a necessity for encreasing the law of piety. Howfar Aśoka became

successful in his individualistic and imperialistic tendencies is a matter of controversy but his own ideas made him unpopular in the succeeding period.

The popular feeling against the ideology of Aśoka was the substancial cause for the mass rebellion in the Mauryan empire. It was not the work of a day but long thinking by the people. Their disregard for the Mauryan ideas were the causes for the organised revolt. The view of Dr. R. N. Mookerji that Aśoka's patronage of Buddhism and deliberate humiliation of the Brāhmaṇas lead to this reaction is not based on sound arguments. The survey of other official records and examination of Indian artistic and literary evidences show that the causes lay in the socio-political outlook of the Mauryan imperialism. The revolt is not a Brāhmaṇic reaction. Much of the hatred and contempt against Mauryan rule was due to Aśokan cultural ideas which were largely foreign to the people in general.

The reaction of the Indian society can be calculated from the study of the several important factors. firstly we find that in the post-Aśokan period people did not favour a centralized system of the government but welcomed the democratic form of administration. This is gleaned from the narration and illustration of Viswantava Jātaka on the toraṇa of Sānchi. The prince has to respect the will of his subject and relinquish the throne as demanded by the people. As regards Aśokan ordinance- इध न किंचि जीवं आरभित्वा प्रजूहितव्यं—it may be submitted that the epigraphs written after his age reveal the popular mind which was in the favour of vedic secrifices. The study of records of the successors of the Mauryas corroborate the above statements.

(A) The Ayodhyā inscription of Dhandeva calls Senāpati Pushyamitra as '*Dv Aswamedh Yaginah.*' It shows that in the Ganga-Yamuna doab, Vedic secrifices were performed in the second century B. C.

(B) Yupa and Nandasa records of Rajputana support the above contention i. e. Vedic secrifies became common after Mauryan age (E. I. Vol. XXIII, p. 52 and vol. XXVII, p. 252)

(C) The Nānāghāt cave inscription of Nāganikā (wife of the Sātavāhana king Sātakaraṇi) mentions several types of Vedic sacrifices performed in the South (Arch. Sur. West Ind. Vol.V, p. 60).

(D) Hāthigumphā record of Khāravela goes to show that in Orissa the king performed the Vedic Rājasuya ceremony. These sacrifices

were performed in conformity with Vedic rituals and they influenced the life of the people. The principle of *Ahiṁsā* was not followed in general. This clearly indicates the popular feeling against the policy of '*Dhammaghosa*' started by Aśoka. The revolt against the ideology of Aśoka was not localised in the Magadha region but had spread throughout India.

The literary evidences if put together will make out a case against Aśokan policy of *Ahiṁsā*. We already know that Chāṇakya was in favour of the punishing rod and hence says 'नित्यमुद्यत दण्डस्यात्'. A similar idea is contained in Manu Smṛti (a book of second century B. C.) where war is regarded as the 'Dharma' of the Kṣatriyas—

न निवर्तते संग्रामात् क्षात्रंधर्यमनुस्मरन् (Manu 7, 87).

An idea parallel to Manu's is reflected in Gītā denouncing the theroy of *Ahiṁsā*. It fills one with the notion that a person is not liable to commit a sin provided he kills some body in war. Arjuna was made to understand that by keeping aloof from the war, one would lose ones fame, ideals and could be liable to a sin—

अथचेत्वमिर्यधर्भ्यं संग्रामं न करिष्यसि
ततः स्वधर्म कीर्ति च हित्वा पापमवाप्स्यति

(Gītā 2,33).

Therefore Arjua was further instructed in the following words :—

क्षुद्रं हृदय दौर्वल्यं त्यक्तवोतिष्ट परंतप ।

(Gītā 2,3).

Nobody would think otherwise after surveying the available material, but would arrive at a final conclusion that popular mind was against *Ahiṁsā* which was so dear to Aśoka. We find a culmination of the worship of Vāsudeva-Kriṣṇa in Gītā which has its epigraphic basis in the Ghosundi inscription of 3rd century B. C. This shows that the Aśokan ideology was not widely respected in the later period.

The second important factor was Aśoka's hateful attitude towards popular social festivals. In R. E. I the king issued commands which reflect his social outlook and it has been clearly stated that—

"न च समाजो कतव्यो । वहुकंहि दोसं समाजम्हि
पस्सति देवानं प्रियो प्रियदसि राजा"

In the later period society had a deep concern and had been associated with *Utsava*, *samāja* which afforded the opportunity to display the popular art of the day. In the Hāthigumphā record of Khāravela, the

king of Kalinga it has been stated that king amused his subject with music, *Utsava* and *Samāja* along with such other performances.

'ततिये पुन वसे गंधववेद वुधोदप नत गीत वादि।
संदसनाहि उसवसमाज कारापनाहि च कीडापयति नगरि'

(E. I., Vol. XX, p. 72).

Even in the Arthaśāstra a similar idea has been expressed and *Samāja* and festivals were held by the people of certain areas. In ancient Indian society men had certain types of competitions in fighting and several kind of intertainments which could not be discarded altogether. Inspite of some objectionable features '*Samāja*' was a sort of national organisation and "Utsava and Sameja" were important social institutions. The literary and epigraphic evidences can be corroborated with later artistic illustrations. The Sunga art that followed the Mauryan Court art, is a clear negation of the Mauryan artistic traditions and depicts the contemporary Indian life in the plastic art. Bharahuta relief has the illustration of festive gathering reflecting a scheme of social '*Samāja*' excluded in the Mauryan art tradition. The lower bas-relief of the outer Prasenjit pillar of Bharahuta railing has a music and dancing-scene a merry making gathering of that age. It presents a dance of heavenly dancers Almbusa, Misrakeshi, Padmavati and Subhadra. There the Alambusha Jātaka gives a description of beauty and charm of Alambusha. Chudamaha festival is second among many such schemes. The ceremonial religious procession of popular class was not abandoned. Bharahuta reliefs portray many such popular demonstrations which were banned in the days of Asoka. On the North pillar of western gate of Sānchi Stupa we have the episode of the Nāgarāja Muchalinda where the Nāga king is attended by his two queens. His ballet troupe includes a dancing girl and five female musicians. Having a look on these bas-reliefs one would very well imagine how far people acted against the wishes and commands of Aśoka (न च समाजो कतव्यो).

The Mauryan Court art is the third expression of the will and cultural ideology of Aśoka which essentially represents his personal social outlook. Mauryan art had no respect for the tradition and social ideas of the people but it was an embodiment of the will of the monarch. Though Sunga art closely followed the line of Mauryan Court art i. e. thoroughly Hinayanist and contains Buddhist illustrations, it reflects more the mind, tradition, social ideas and cultural ideology of the major section of the people than Mauryan art was capable of. Sunga artistic illustrations are different in motifs, form, technique and their significance. The exa-

mination of the Sunga tradition reveals that a gradual revolution was making itself felt against all that was Aśokan. The artistic representations of Bharahuta railing and Sānchi Toraṇa have a continuous narration of social scenes and social ideas of the contemporary society. It provides an illuminating commentary on the Indian attitude of the people in post-Aśokan age. The various examples of the plastic art show the scheme of life as planned in early Buddhism where Samāja-merry making and social gathering were not excluded. The Bharahuta and Sānchi panels and medallious are nothing but illustrations of scenes of 'Samāja.' The rectangular panels carved on the lines of scroll paintings of popular tradition. In later periods art has been impressed by the social character of the country and contemporary ideas of the people were fixed in permanent material.

The most important social aspect of the post-Aśokam age was the restablishment of a social system i. e. Varṇāśrama which had no place in the early Buddhist life. Manu reenunciated the Vedic theory of four Varṇas to establish again the authority of Veda which had no place in the Buddhistic thought. The Āśrama system was emphasised by the smṛiti writer and the Buddhist scheme of joining the saṁgh was not appreciated. Manu says :—

लोकानान्तु विवृद्धयर्थं मुखबाहूरुपादत:
ब्राह्मणंक्षत्रियं वैश्यं शूद्रश्च निखर्त्तयत्

(Manu 1, 31).

चतुर्थमायुषो भागं व्यक्तवा सङ्गान् परिव्रजेत्

(Manu 6, 33).

The social scheme of Manu which was rejected by the Buddhist was emphasised here in Bhagavadgītā (4, 13)—

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मयासृष्टं गुण कर्म विभागश:

Thus it may be concluded that Indian society after the death of Aśoka was planned on the Varṇāśrama system which was denounced by the Buddhist theology. In the Sunga age the cultural ideas of Aśoka and his negligence and disrespect for social traditions were strongly resented by the people. Even the Buddhist artists in the later days endorsed and adopted the social tradition and popular feeling of the people. The posterity showed disregard and discontentment against the wish and ideas of the greatest figure in Indian history.